Session 3 presentation

We are living in a time of great moral pressure. We're faced with many questions. How do I behave in light of the pandemic? How do I know how to sort through issues of personal autonomy and common good? How do I respond to racial injustice and to competing claims about how we as a society should address it? How should I behave toward people who hold political views that are different from mine? How should I treat them if I think their views are evil? How can I know what's true and what is ideological spin or flat-out falsehood? How can I learn to recognize my own bias, my own hatred, and my own tendency to lie, both to myself and to others? These are all critically important questions and the answers are often different for people of faith. How we respond to them provides us with at least part of the answer to how we make ourselves at home in all circumstances.

Our primary response to all of this pressure is to claim that right action emerges from right prayer. Or as the Anglican theologian Martin Thornton put it, "Moral action only flows from doctrinal truth by grace and faith, that is through prayer." Think about that for a minute. Right action emerges from right prayer. For myself, I know I'm much more likely to behave as if right action emerges from right thinking or even from right feelings. Said another way, if I like it, if I agree with it, or if I can rationalize it, I can convince myself it's moral.

The tradition of the Church and the Episcopal Church in particular, is that we make use of common prayer and especially the pattern of weekly Eucharist and daily office, and allow ourselves to be shaped by the Church's prayer. The Church's prayer is not of our own making. It helps both stretch us and nurture us and helps us see beyond ourselves. It can surprise us, irritate us, confuse us. It can encourage us, challenge us, and give us a glimpse of the Kingdom of Heaven, here now and still to come.

Obviously, our ability to participate in the Eucharist has been upended this year. That makes it even more important to work at how we do take part in corporate prayer using the options available to us.

The tradition also assumes that we have ways of reflecting on our lives, ways of gaining perspective and pausing to recalibrate or reform or renew our own behavior. Our reflection *is* of our own making. It fits our personalities and often works best when it feels natural and integrated, when it feels easy to engage even if we don't love the outcome.

But still, when we enter into our reflection, the assumption is that we do so steeped in the prayer of the Church. Maybe we've participated in several thousand Eucharists over our lives, and said the daily office many thousand more. However many we've attended, the assumption is that as Christians we haven't simply entered into our reflection fully grown, independent of influence, and free to make moral choices from our own innate wisdom. We've been formed by prayer.

The spiritual practice we encouraged you to experiment with this past week was Contemplation – Intercession – Action. Contemplation, the starting point, asks that we simply be present to what is. That we try to quiet our judgments, our hopes, our fears, and see whatever is before us as it is.

The Church assumes that our capacity to see things as they are – to perhaps see things more the way God may see them – is a function of our prayer life. It is a function of our willingness to seek union with God, and then let our connection with others and with the world around us, proceed from, enrich, and extend our relationship with God.

Henri Nouwen, in writing about the three movements of the spiritual life, also assumes that pattern. I'm going to bring up the document we shared about this. He talks about the spiritual life as moving between poles: we move between loneliness and solitude, between hostility and hospitality, and between illusion and prayer.

One thing that's really important to understand is that the poles are not equal. In terms of the spiritual life, hospitality *is* better than hostility. Prayer really *is* better than illusion.

It can be easy, though, to slip into thinking of this model as describing polarities. Polarities are about seeing and embracing both/and rather than either/or thinking. That's a helpful approach in many areas of life, and in fact describes one of the most fundamental aspects *of* life – breathing. We breathe in and we breathe out. It's a classic illustration of polarity. If either of those functions stop – if we stop breathing in or we stop breathing out – we die. One isn't better or more necessary than the other.

That's not true about Nouwen's model. If you can manage to live your life free from hostility and able to "create free and fearless space" to welcome the stranger through genuine hospitality, well, more power to you. Similarly, if you can avoid loneliness and consistently nurture and embrace your solitude through a rich prayer life, what a gift that is.

It's also not particularly descriptive of most human beings. It certainly doesn't describe me. We are all subject to sin and human limitation. We can practice silence and solitude; we can develop our prayer life; and we can work on a complex, life-giving hospitality that goes far beyond being nice. But very few of us are going to be there even half of the time. What we can do is try to see things as they are and engage the spiritual practices that will bring us closer to God and therefore closer to Reality.

I think sometimes we can get this wrong in the church. We can come at spiritual life as if it's simply a matter of knowing what's "right," or using certain words that seem kind of churchy. Clergy especially can also be far more interested in (or at least more worried about) the latest church growth or leadership trend than in teaching people to pray.

So, sometimes, we get the impression that we can stop being hostile if we just focus on how welcoming we *should* be. And we can assume we're being beacons of hospitality because we've been told that some specific techniques to help people feel comfortable are the right way to include people. We can avoid contemplation – seeing what is – and we can avoid looking at our own loneliness and hostility and illusion in favor of easy answers and quick fixes.

And yet we often know somewhere in the back of our minds that we won't really conquer our loneliness by telling ourselves we "shouldn't be lonely" and making up a list of the people who love us. We might feel better temporarily, but the loneliness remains. We won't replace illusion by creating new stories that sound better than the old ones, but still leave us with an aching emptiness or fear or free-floating anger.

Rather, our decisions to engage the spiritual practices of the Church, our decision (not our feeling or our opinion) to take on spiritual disciplines helps us move from illusion to prayer. As Nouwen said, moving from illusion to prayer "undergirds and makes possible the movements from loneliness to solitude and from hostility to hospitality and leads us to the core of the spiritual life…"

We're coming back to the Circles of Influence we talked about in our first session – the idea that we need to be aware of what we control, what we influence, and what we neither control nor influence.

One thing we definitely control is our own spiritual practice. What choices does each of us have about our spiritual lives? How do we structure our spiritual lives to continually put ourselves in the pathways of grace? How do we become more sensitive to the work of Holy Spirit in our lives, even when – or maybe especially when – God seems mostly absent or seems to be focused on something that we really don't want to pay any attention to?

Michelle Heyne, OA

9/24/20